Thirty Years’ War | HISTORY

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Catholic League Victories

To the west, the Spanish army aligned with the so-called Catholic League, nation-states in present-day Germany, Belgium and France, who supported Ferdinand II.

At least initially, Ferdinand II’s forces were successful, quelling the rebellion to the east and in northern Austria, leading to the dissolution of the Protestant Union. However, fighting continued to the west, where Denmark-Norway’s King Christian IV threw his support behind the Protestant states.

Even with help from soldiers from Scotland, however, the armies of Denmark-Norway fell to the forces of Ferdinand II, ceding much of northern Europe to the emperor.

Gustavus Adolphus

But in 1630, Sweden, under the leadership of Gustavus Adolphus, took the side of the northern Protestants and joined the fight, with its army helping to push Catholic forces back and regain much of the lost territory lost by the Protestant Union.

With the support of the Swedes, Protestant victories continued. However, when Gustavus Adolphus was killed in the Battle of Lutzen in 1632, the Swedes lost some of their resolve.

Using military assistance of Bohemian nobleman Albrecht von Wallenstein, who provided his army of an estimated 50,000 soldiers to Ferdinand II in exchange for the freedom to plunder any captured territory, began to respond and, by 1635, the Swedes were vanquished.

The resulting treaty, the so-called Peace of Prague, protected the territories of the Lutheran/Calvinist rulers of northeastern Germany, but not those of the south and west in present-day Austria and the Czech Republic. With religious and political tensions in the latter regions remaining high, fighting continued.

French Involvement

The French, though Catholic, were rivals of the Habsburgs and were unhappy with the provisions of the Peace of Prague.

Thus, the French entered the conflict in 1635. However, at least initially, their armies were unable to make inroads against the forces of Ferdinand II, even after he died of old age in 1637.

The next year, 1643, was pivotal in the decades-long conflict. That year, Denmark-Norway took up arms again, this time fighting on the side of the Habsburgs and the Holy Roman Empire.

At around the same time, French monarch Louis XIII died, leaving the throne to his 5-year-old son, Louis XIV, and creating a leadership vacuum in Paris.

Over the ensuing years, the French army had several notable victories, but also suffered significant defeats, particularly at the Battle of Herbsthausen in 1645. Also in 1645, the Swedes attacked Vienna, but were unable to capture the city from the Holy Roman Empire.

Prague Castle Captured

In 1647, the Habsburg forces led by Octavio Piccolomini were able to repel the Swedes and the French from what is now Austria.

The next year, in the Battle of Prague — the last significant fighting in the Thirty Years' War — the Swedes captured Prague Castle from the forces of the Holy Roman Empire (and looted the priceless art collection in the castle), but were unable to take the bulk of the city.

By this time, only the Austrian territories remained under the control of the Habsburgs.

Peace of Westphalia

Over the course of 1648, the various parties in the conflict signed a series of treaties called the Peace of Westphalia, effectively ending the Thirty Years' War — although not without significant geopolitical effects for Europe.

Weakened by the fighting, for example, Spain lost its grip over Portugal and the

Dutch republic. The peace accords also granted increased autonomy to the former Holy Roman Empire states in German-speaking central Europe.

Legacy of the Thirty Years' War

The war also fostered a fear of the "other" in communities across the European continent, and caused an increased distrust among those of different ethnicities and religious faiths – sentiments that persist to some degree to this day.

Sources

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